



VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

ITINERARY

# CUBA: THE BEST OF THE GREATER ANTILLES, AT LAST!

*A journey combining both cultural and birding experiences*

**MARCH 23 – APRIL 3, 2025**

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**Bee Hummingbird © D. Ascanio.**

*Encompassing 110,860 square kilometers (42,803 square miles), the incredible island of Cuba hosts nearly 30 endemic bird species including the smallest bird in the world, the Bee Hummingbird, and a quail-dove whose closest living relative is still unknown. It is also home for the most mystery-shrouded jewels of the Caribbean, namely the nearly mythical Zapata Rail and possibly (remotely possible) the only remnant population of Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Complementing its natural history attributes, Cuba also is the proud owner of a vibrant and colorful culture and a long & storied history.*

*VENT presents a unique opportunity to visit the island-nation that has, for so many decades, been off limits to most American citizens. Through the Support for the Cuban People program we are able to visit this island-nation, not as “typical” tourists but as ambassadors, with the chance to experience some of the country’s great natural heritage while interacting with the Cuban people and culture. While this special program engages participants with Cuba’s people, it has been designed with an especially strong focus on birding and nature.*

*Cuba, along with Jamaica, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, forms the island-cluster known as the Greater Antilles. Although each of these islands possesses a distinct avifauna, Cuba is the largest island and certainly the gem of them all. On this trip, we’ll travel to different sites in the western and central parts of Cuba, visiting protected areas and reserves in a variety of habitats from wetlands and mangrove to dry scrub, farmland and scenic coastline. We’ll visit some of the best birding locations seeking many species found nowhere else but here in addition to a range of island subspecies of more broadly occurring Caribbean endemics. The possibilities include the outrageous Cuban Trogon, dazzling Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Cuban Parrot, and the ever-comical Cuban Tody among others.*

*Throughout our travels, Cuban culture will be on full display. We’ll experience the charm of the Cubanos—their customs, their cuisine, and their rich and unique contemporary history—while learning about the challenges they face.*

*From every point of view, Cuba is an amazing destination. Its unique political system, well-maintained natural areas, wonderful people, impressive landscape, incredible architecture, and amazing cars (dated from the 50s) promise an unforgettable experience!*

**March 23. Day 1: Flight Camaguey.** You should plan your flights to arrive Camaguey, Cuba\* (airport code CMW) any time today. After clearing immigration and customs you will be transferred to your accommodations for the evening. We plan to meet as a group for the first time today at 6:00 p.m. for orientation followed by dinner.

**\*Note: Travel to Cuba may require an extra night in Miami or other U.S. gateway cities that provides air service to Camaguey prior to your arrival in Cuba. Please note that the cost of such arrangements is not included in the tour fee.**

Upon arrival in Camagüey (eastern part of the island) one notices some of Cuba’s most remarkable iconography, its unique “American Almonds” (1957 Chevrolet, 1953 Ford, and 1958 Dodge) as well as much of the untouched 50’s era architecture. Along with such unique and picturesque settings, Cuba is also a great destination for meeting people, and for searching for its unique birdlife, both of which will be enjoyed throughout the trip.

Camagüey was one of the first seven villages founded by the Spaniards and played an important role in the cattle and sugar industries. Dating to colonial times, the city recently celebrated the 500-year anniversary of its founding. This evening, we will have the opportunity to admire many architectural styles including Art Deco, Neo-colonial, Eclectic and Neoclassical.

NIGHT: Hostel San Rafael, Camagüey

**March 24, Day 2: Early morning to Najasa; Drive to Cayo Coco in Jardines del Rey Archipelago.**

An early morning departure to the valleys surrounding Sierra de Najasa will give us a good opportunity to look for two of the most restricted distribution Cuban endemics; the Giant Kingbird and the Cuban Palm Crow. Both species are rare elsewhere, thus our efforts will focus on finding these species. One should notice that the Cuban Palm Crow and the Cuban Crow both occur in this part of the island making voice, wing beat and behavior the key for reliable identification of either one. Other species we should see include Cuban Parrot and Plain Pigeon.



**Giant Kingbird © D. Ascanio**

After lunch in Camagüey, we will head west and then north to reach the 17-mile causeway to Cayo Coco or Moron, depending on what is possible at the time. This road was finished in the late 80's during the time when Cuba first opened itself to tourism. Today it is a key site for seeing Laughing Gull, various species of terns, Tricolored Heron, and shorebirds. Depending on the water level, views of American Flamingoes can be enjoyed foraging in the shallow areas.

NIGHT: Vila Gale Cayo Paredon Grande, Jardines del Rey

**March 25, Day 3: Cayo Coco, Cayo Paredón Grande & Cayo Guillermo.** Cayo Coco (Cuba's fourth largest island) and neighboring keys are part of an archipelago known as Jardines del Rey (King's Garden). Given its size, this island hosts rich and varied habitats including mangroves, deciduous forest, mudflats, and beaches, and



**Zapata Sparrow © D. Ascanio**

you can be sure there are important birds associated with each of these habitats! Here we will have the opportunity to join a local ornithologist to learn about Cuba's conservation challenges and achievements. An early morning departure to Cayo Paredón Grande will offer opportunities to look for the secretive Cuban Gnatcatcher and the brightly colored Western Spindalis. We will also look for the amazing Zapata Sparrow, the unique Great Lizard-Cuckoo, the astonishing Cuban Green Woodpecker and many more. Toward the end of the morning, we will look for the rare and range-restricted Bahama Mockingbird while searching out other island endemics such as Cuban Black Hawk and Oriente Warbler.

In the afternoon, we will head in the opposite direction to Cayo Guillermo where several American Flamingos share the wetlands with a range of waterfowl, cormorants, pelicans, and shorebirds. Cayo Guillermo is a photographer's paradise, and we will surely spend some time enjoying it.

NIGHT: Vila Gale Cayo Paredon Grande, Jardines del Rey

**March 26, Day 4: Cayo Coco to Trinidad.** An early morning visit to Cueva de los Jabalies (Wild Boars Cave) usually produces Key West Quail Dove, and a close encounter with the comical and diminutive Cuban Tody, the brightest member of this highly localized genus. After an Optional morning birding, we will have lunch in Cayo Coco followed with a drive west to Trinidad.

NIGHT: Melia Trinidad Peninsula, Trinidad

**March 27, Day 5: Cienfuegos Botanic Garden & Ancón Península.** After breakfast, today's activities will start at the Cienfuegos Botanic Garden. This location will surely add new species to our checklist ranging from the extremely rare Gundlach's Hawk (rare and confiding) to the more widespread Cuban Oriole. There will probably be Antillean Palm-Swift flying around, and we might come across the astonishing Cuban Trogon, Cuba's national bird. We will then depart for a city tour of Cienfuegos followed by a visit to the amazing Tomas Terry Theater.

NIGHT: Melia Trinidad Peninsula, Trinidad

**March 28, Day 6: Parque el Cubano, Bermeja and the Bay of Pigs.** An optional early morning field trip will find us at the entrance of the small Parque el Cubano just outside of Trinidad where we may be rewarded with sightings of more endemic birds, namely the Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Vireo and Cuban Green Woodpecker. The park itself protects some good tracks of tropical dry forest and our visit might be rewarded with other species such as the Cuban Bullfinch, the more widespread Yellow-faced Grassquit and even a Limpkin.



Gray-fronted Quail-Dove © D. Ascanio

After a brief city tour of Trinidad, we will have lunch at the Bay of Cienfuegos and start our drive to Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs), stopping on route at one of the birdiest locations in Cuba, Bermejas in Ciénaga de Zapata National Park. This site is so productive that we may visit it again tomorrow morning.

Here, we will meet some of the finest local birders (rangers) of the island. Sometimes they know of a nearby nest of Bare-legged Owls; at other times they spread rice at the trail entrance where three species of quail-doves can be seen: Blue-headed, Gray-fronted, and Key West. Most importantly a local flowering bush attracts the Bee Hummingbird - the smallest bird in the world! Other endemic birds previously seen here include the Cuban Pygmy-Owl and Cuban Vireo.

NIGHT: Casa Enrique in Playa Larga, Cienaga de Zapata

**March 29, Day 7: Bermeja, Soplillar and Bay of Pigs in the Zapata Peninsula.** The Zapata Peninsula is certainly one of the most biodiverse areas of Cuba. Here, in Cuba's most important wetland area (a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve), more than 170 species of birds have been reported. Among the endemics that reside here we may observe Cuban Parrot, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Vireo, and Cuban Green Woodpecker. On some of our previous trips we have seen Cuban Parakeets in the mango trees adjacent to the park entrance. However, this morning's objective is finding as many as four species of quail-doves. The endemic Blue-headed and Gray-fronted quail-doves are of highest priority, but Key West and Ruddy quail-doves are also of considerable interest. After a morning filled with endemic birds, we will head back to Playa Girón for lunch and an afternoon siesta. Later this afternoon we will visit two other areas, Soplillar and Playa Larga, to search for other island specialty birds, including the Fernandina's Flicker and Red-shouldered Blackbird.

NIGHT: Casa Enrique in Playa Larga, Cienaga de Zapata

**March 30, Day 8: La Turba or Santo Tomás in the Zapata Peninsula; Havana and Soroa.** This morning we will make our way inside the Zapata Swamp. There are two options and we will choose the most appropriate based on recent sightings. Searching for this wren is always a challenge, and although we have seen it on previous tours, we will need everyone to be alert and focused to give ourselves the greatest chance for success. As the day warms, we will board our vehicle for the drive to Havana. En route we will pay homage to Ernest Hemingway at his former home, Finca Vigia, preserved as it was on the day he left it, and discuss his life with Cuban Hemmingway experts who work and do research here. After lunch, we will continue our drive to Soroa, in Pinar del Río province on the west side of the island.

NIGHT: Private Accommodations in Soroa, Artemisa

**March 31, Day 9: Soroa & Viñales.** Our day starts prior to breakfast in the farmlands around the hotel where we have previously seen Ruddy Quail-Dove (difficult), Cuban Trogon, and Neotropical migrants including Yellow-throated, Black-and-white, and Bay-breasted warblers.

After breakfast we will drive west to the town of Viñales, another UNESCO World Heritage site, and one of the most frequently visited locations in Cuba: first, because of its unique mogotes, or rounded limestone hills, but also because this is the land where the finest tobacco in the country is grown. Within these limestone formations the endemic Cuban Solitaire sings frequently and we will spend time searching for it.

Later, we will continue to an organic farm to enjoy lunch and look for the range restricted Olive-capped Warbler and the endemic Yellow-headed Warbler.

Following lunch, we will visit a tobacco farm and learn about the different kinds of leaves and the process of making cigars.

NIGHT: Private Accommodations in Soroa, Artemisa



**Blue-headed Quail-Dove © D. Ascanio**



**Zapata Wren © D. Ascanio**

**April 1, Day 10: From Soroa to Havana. Visit Las Terrazas community.** Today will be a day filled with cultural and nature experiences. Prior to breakfast we will work the surroundings of our accommodations where Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Cuban Emerald, Antillean Palm-Swift, Loggerhead Kingbird, Greater Antillean Grackle, and Cuban Oriole abound. Not far from Soroa and also in the mountains of the Sierra Del Rosario Biosphere Reserve is the planned eco-community of Las Terrazas, where we learn about life there from local residents and how the entire region was re-forested. Here, we may have a chance to taste a superb Cuban coffee.



Cuban Solitaire © D. Ascanio

NIGHT: Grand Aston La Habana

**April 2, Day 11: Havana.** A full day is reserved to enjoy the people, architecture, old vehicles, and local artists of the Cuban capital. We will begin our day with a walk through the historic streets and squares of Old Havana, making numerous stops. This is a must for the photographers among us! We will discuss life in the time when the Spaniards ruled the island and will understand the importance of Cuba in the expansion of Spain in the Americas. Lunch will be arranged in Old Havana, followed by an afternoon to explore the art market along the harbor's edge. Finally, we'll enjoy a farewell dinner in one of the restaurants in Old Havana. Following dinner we can attend an optional music show near the hotel.

NIGHT: Grand Aston Hotel, Havana

**April 3, Day 12: Departure for Home.** Transfer to the airport for our flight home with flights departing anytime today.

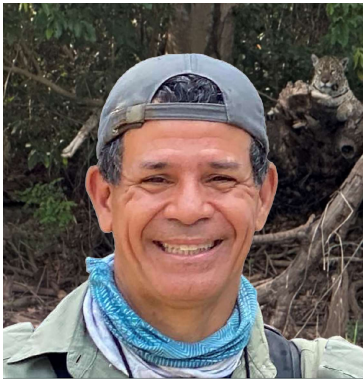


Photo: D. Ascanio

**Special Note:** Because VENT will be arriving under the program licensed "Support for the Cuban People" program, there will be no time allotted for independent travel or exploration. Our itinerary affords a schedule of immersive experiences in cultural exchange and education. It is the aim of the program that in engaging with Cuban naturalists, birders and farmers we all learn about the transformative power that real contact can have in the lives of ordinary people.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 10 tour participants. However, VENT reserves the right to increase the tour limit by one in order to accommodate a couple when only one space is available.

**TOUR LEADER: David Ascanio with the assistance of local guides.**



**David Ascanio**, a Venezuelan birder and naturalist, has spent 35 years guiding birding tours throughout his native country, Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Costa Rica, the Orinoco and Amazon river basins, Trinidad & Tobago, Suriname, the Guianas, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Lesser Antilles, Cuba, Chile, and Panama. He is especially interested in bird vocalizations and has a private library containing voices of more than 70% of all the birds of Venezuela. David combines superb birding skills with an astonishing command of bird vocalizations. He has published a book for children about bird songs and has coauthored the descriptions of two new species, the Rio Orinoco Spinetail and the Delta Amacuro Softtail. David has also published various manuscripts about the birds of the *llanos* (plains), the Orinoco River Island species, and the pantepui endemic species for which he has become an authority. He is the first author of the *Field Guide to the Birds of Venezuela* (2017). David is an excellent communicator, has a great sense of humor, and is tireless in helping others find birds and wildlife. These traits have made him one of the most popular naturalists/guides in the Neotropics.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for each tour is **\$9595** per person in double occupancy from Camaguey (ends in Havana), Cuba. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 12 (time allowing), accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, tips at restaurants and to porters, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. The tour fee does not include the cost of the international flights to Camaguey with the return from Havana, tourist card fees, alcoholic beverages, gratuities to drivers and leader/guides, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$1075**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at <https://ventbird.com>) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (October 24, 2024) prior to the tour departure date.

**MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE REQUIREMENT:** This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may **NOT** be available. **For this reason, travel insurance which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation on this tour.** This coverage is included in the Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™ program. Through Ripcord, “emergency evacuation” can be purchased as a stand-alone benefit or as part of a comprehensive travel insurance policy. If you choose not to purchase insurance through Ripcord, you are required to obtain it through another provider.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize

the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

**CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:**

**Cancellation by Participant:**

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months from the date of participant tour cancellation, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

<u>If participant cancels:</u>	<u>Participant's refund will be:</u>
180 days or more before departure date	Participant's deposit minus \$500*
179 to 151 days before departure date	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded
150 days or less before departure date	No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months from the date of participant tour cancellation, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

**Cancellation by VENT:**

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A "**Force Majeure**" event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.**

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.



**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend its **Ripcord** plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or political or security reasons, waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.\*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: <https://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird>; or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

\*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip cost in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

### **Coronavirus (COVID-19):**

In line with the decision made by the federal government (including the CDC), Redpoint considers COVID-19 illness as any other seasonal respiratory illness. Providing only a positive Covid-19 test result will likely not be considered a covered event per the terms and conditions of the company's policy. Redpoint maintains a **Coronavirus FAQ** page on its website that addresses questions and concerns travelers may have regarding COVID-19 and Redpoint's policy. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of relevant topics.

Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ** page at the following link: [https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid\\_19\\_faq/](https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/).

**AIR INFORMATION:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.\* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. **Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be held responsible for any air ticket penalties.**

\*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

**BAGGAGE:** The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your airline to find out specific weight restrictions. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: <http://www.tsa.gov/>.

As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, medication, and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag.

**CLOTHING:** Lightweight field clothing in muted, natural colors and casual attire are suitable for this tour. Bring several pairs of long pants, comfortable lightweight shirts, and a swimsuit. We strongly recommend bringing several long-sleeved shirts, as they provide protection from the sun and occasional biting insects, and in case of an unexpected cold front. Bring bug repellent since mosquitoes might be a problem inside forested areas. You will be glad you have full body protection. A good hat for protection against the sun and rain is essential. A small umbrella is recommended as well. Your luggage should include some light rain gear. In the event of a cold front from the north, we recommend you to bring a warm sweater or light jacket.

**FOOTWEAR:** A comfortable pair of walking shoes or light hiking boots is fine. Rubber boots are NOT needed.

**LAUNDRY SERVICE:** Laundry service may be available in some of our accommodations but should not be expected. You should pack for the tour with the expectation that you will need to bring enough clothes to get you through the trip without access to laundry service.

**CLIMATE & WEATHER:** We will be traveling during the dry season. However, peculiarities of the island's topography create microclimates where rain can occur at any time. Temperatures will be in the 80s to possibly 90 degrees. Humidity levels will be low to moderate. Participants need to be prepared for hot and dry conditions in some areas. Overall, conditions should be pleasant with cool mornings and warm afternoons. Elevations will be mostly at sea level.

**CONDITIONS:** The key word for an unforgettable Cuba tour is flexibility. Cuba has opened to mass tourism thus the service quality is unreliable. Although we have made a special effort to secure the best possible accommodations near the birding areas, we cannot guarantee that we will get them. All accommodations in Cuba should have air-conditioned rooms and hot water, but the quality of accommodations may vary from room to room. The transportation includes large, modern, air-conditioned buses with reclining seats. We will make an effort to supply large enough buses to secure window seats for everyone, but here again, this cannot be guaranteed. The food quality varies from good to very good. Fish is available in most locations and is usually very fresh. Participants should avoid eating raw salads, especially lettuce and tomato.

In some areas we will be walking on flat trails or along the road. One trail may involve a stairway but it's a very short one. In the Zapata Peninsula we might walk a trail no longer than half a mile. Comfortable and well-ventilated walking shoes are highly recommended.

Expect early mornings! On some days we will return to our hotel for breakfast and on other days we might have breakfast before the crack of dawn. Only an optional evening outing is expected.

**EQUIPMENT:** One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. Since some hotels will not have decent lighting for night reading, and may even have blackouts, we suggest you bring a small flashlight or headlamp. We strongly suggest photographers to bring a dry bag to protect the equipment in case it rains in one of the trails when we're away from the bus.

The following items will come in handy during your trip:

- Belt pack or daypack (for carrying books, sunscreen and extra digital storage media)
- Sunglasses, sunscreen, and lip balm
- A small flashlight or headlamp (latter is better for doing field checklist in hotels with poor light conditions)
- Battery-operated alarm clock (nowadays you can use the one in your mobile)

- Refillable water bottle
- Camera with ample digital storage and spare batteries (these can be hard to find in Cuba)
- Insect repellent is essential and it is suggested to bring a roll-on type rather than spray type.

### **BINOCULARS & SPOTTING SCOPES:**

**Binoculars** – We strongly recommend good binocular of at least 7x35, 8x42, 10x40, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend that you do NOT bring mini-binocular of any kind. Some people like them because they are small and lightweight, but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. Trying to find a bird in your binocular using minis is like trying to read a book through a keyhole. You will be very frustrated, and even if you do manage to get the bird in your binocular before it flies, you will have a poor view. You will find that 7x35 or 8x42 binocular are compact and light enough.

**Spotting Scopes** – Your tour leader will have a scope available for group use throughout the trip, however, if you prefer to bring your own scope, you should feel free to do so.

**TRAVEL DOCUMENTS:** For United States citizens, a passport valid for six months after your return date is required for entry into Cuba. Tourist cards are required for United States and Canadian citizens to enter Cuba and can be purchased through your airline prior to boarding your flight. Tourist cards can also be purchased on line prior to entering Cuba by going to <https://cubavisaservices.com/>. Cost for the tourist card runs from \$75-\$100.

For the sake of security, it is also recommended that you bring a second form of valid identification such as a current driver's license or a copy of your birth certificate.

**CURRENCY & MONEY MATTERS:** Your tour fee includes most necessary expenses. The Cuban government eliminated the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) in 2021 and no longer allows transactions in US dollars. The best way to be prepared is to bring Euros or Canadian Dollars to Cuba in small denominations. Keep in mind, several companies and locations will only provide change in the official currency, the Cuban peso (CUP), which cannot be exchanged back into international currency before leaving Cuba. This is especially true in the airport. For that reason, small bills and exact change should be used as often as possible.

We recommend that you bring enough cash to cover tips, evening entertainment, and a bit of emergency money during your stay. To be safe, 150 € per person per day is recommended.

United States credit and debit cards are not yet allowed as a form of payment in Cuba, except for the Covid antigen test where this is the only form of payment accepted. Other international credit cards are only accepted in very few government establishments. Please, plan to take cash for your purchases, drinks and meals not included in the program.

**ELECTRICITY:** While some hotels in Cuba use a regular American style socket (Type B), others, particularly older properties, use Types A and C, or some hybrid design of the two. Please bring a plug adapter to use when recharging batteries and devices. Also, bear in mind that energy service varies from 110 to 220V. A voltage converter may be necessary for some appliances. Please, check the socket and your appliances before use.

**LANGUAGE:** Spanish is the language most widely spoken in Cuba.

**TIME:** Before March 8, Cuba is on Cuba Standard Time (CST), the same time as Eastern Standard Time (EST). After March 8, Cuba is on Daylight Time (CDT), the same time as Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

**HEALTH:** VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

**COVID-19:** We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying “Up to Date” with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19.

**Insect Repellents** – There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.
- Picaridin: A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- Herbal insect repellents: Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

An insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- Permanone® (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- Insect Shield® apparel: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

**SUGGESTED READING:** A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

### ***BIRDS – ESSENTIAL:***

- Raffaele, Herbert; Wiley, James; Garrido, Orlando; Keith, Allan & Janis Raffaele. 2020. *Birds of the West Indies*. Princeton Field Guide. Second edition. **This is the most important field guide for this tour.**
- Kirwan, Guy; Anthony Levesque et al. *Birds of the West Indies*. Lynx and Birdlife International Field Guides. 2019.
- Aldefer, Jonathan. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. 2017. Seventh Edition. National Geographic Society, 2011.
- Navarro, Nils. *Endemic Birds of Cuba. A comprehensive Field Guide*. 2015. Ediciones Nuevos Mundos.
- Navarro, Nils. *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Cuba 2024*. Ediciones Nuevos Mundos.
- Garrido, Orlando & Arturo Kirkconnell. *Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba*. 2000. Comstock Publishing Associates (Cornell University Press): New York. Useful information although taxonomy is out-of-date.
- Kirwan, Guy, Arturo Kirkconnell & Mike Flieg. *A Birdwatcher's Guide to Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and the Caymans*. Prion Birdwatchers' Guide Series. Prion, Ltd, 2010.

### ***BIRDS – APP's:***

- Merlin*. Cornell Lab of Ornithology. An incredible source of photo, information and voice of several birds. Once the app is downloaded, go to the packs and download the one for the Caribbean (this pack includes Cuba).
- eBird*. Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The largest bird-related citizen science program ever, this app allows the user to compile its bird observations in an easy way. Once downloaded, a username must be created with a password. When using the app in the mobile, a pack for the country must be downloaded.

### **FICTION:**

- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Many editions are available.
- Kushner, Rachel. *Telex from Cuba*. Scribner, 2009. This highly regarded debut novel tells the story of Americans living in Cuba in the final years before the Castro-led revolution. A National Book Award finalist.

### **HISTORY AND HISTORICAL FICTION:**

- Chomsky, Aviva and Barry Carr. *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. The Latin America Reader Series. Duke University Press Books, 2004.
- Rathbone, John Paul. *The Sugar King of Havana: The Rise and Fall of Julio Lobo, Cuba's Last Tycoon*. Penguin Books, 2011.
- Weissman, Muriel Mcavoy. *Sugar Baron: Manuel Rionda and the Fortunes of Pre-Castro Cuba*. University Press of Florida, 2003.

### **TRAVEL AND MUSIC:**

- Baker, Christopher P. *Moon Cuba*. Moon handbooks. Sixth edition. Avalon Travel Publishing, 2015.
- Sainsbury, Brendan and Luke Waterson. *Lonely planet Cuba*. Seventh edition Lonely Planet, 2013.
- Sublette, Ned. *Cuba and its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*. Chicago Review Press, 2007.

### **MOVIES AND DOCUMENTARIES:**

- **The Cuba Libre Story (2015)**. A Netflix original series broadly covering several aspects of Cuba's history, from Columbus arrival to the time of the revolution.
- **Our Man in Havana (1959)**.
- **Buena Vista Social Club (1999)**.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, "*VENT*") act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity

which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on October 1, 2024, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "**Airline**") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

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